World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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IMAGE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations is central to global efforts to solve problems which challenge humanity. Day in and day out, the UN and its family of organizations work to promote respect for human rights, protect the environment, fight disease, promote development and reduce poverty. Yet, there are many people who do not understand the work that the UN does around the world. In this episode of **World Chronicle**, Shashi Tharoor, Director of Communications and Special Projects in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, talks about the Organization's image and its relationship with the international media.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Over the past fifty years, the United Nations has always been in the news, but seldom more than today. From peacekeeping operations to humanitarian emergencies, it has ongoing operations on every continent, directly affecting the lives of hundreds and billions of people. But how well is today's United Nations really understood?

Our guest today is in a unique position to know. He is Shashi Tharoor, Director of Communications and Special Projects in the Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. From Iraq to the Balkans to East Timor, he has been a participant and witness to recent history. He is also the author of fiction and non-fiction books. Joining me to talk with Mr. Tharoor is Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times* and Ian Williams of *The Nation*.

Mr. Tharoor, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

THAROOR: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: The question: is the United Nations really understood? First of all, what is the United Nations? How would you define the United Nations – 188 Member States all pulling in different directions – hardly a united body.

THAROOR: Yes. Well, I think in some ways I like to say that it's both a stage and an actor. It is a stage and then it's a platform on which this 188 Member States try and write the script as it were for the Organization. But it's also the actor that acts according to that script that the Member States lay out. And the Secretary-General and his staff, whether at headquarters or in the field or in the numerous agencies, funds and programmes that make up the UN system, go out to act on behalf of these Member States, on behalf of what we still like to call the International Community. S o in a sense, the United Nations is that paradox, a body, which in some ways has one shape and one face and at the same time has a multiplicity of faces, and arms and feet, to do the bidding of that first face.

LITTLEJOHNS: And how well do you think is it understood?

THAROOR: I would say that there's a great deal of misunderstanding about the United Nations as well as some level of comprehension. The level has, I think, improved in recent years with the UN having been in the news much more. People had to understand how it works and we have an excellent New York-based UN press corp which I think has

really done some excellent work in getting across the message explaining to the world what the UN is and what it does. When you get beyond that corridor, you have vast areas of problems. You certainly have a lot of ignorant territorialists, you have opinions being expressed which are not often based on an appreciation of what the institution actually does and then when people abroad have to write about what is going on and they don't understand how the UN works, you can find frequent mistakes. Whether it is, for example something as simple as the multinational force that was UN-authorized in East Timor now under the Australians being called a UN force and UN peacekeepers, right down to the question of whether it is the Secretary-General Kofi Annan who decides such things as whether General Assembly will open on a particular day or not, people do not always understand the way in which the UN works. For the record, of course it's the Member States who decides whether the Assembly ....

LITTLEJOHNS: So aside from the saintly resident press corps, would you say that the UN does not get a fair shake?

THAROOR: I think the UN, by and large, gets a fair shake and then some. In other words, I think we are given credit were credit is due. We're often given blame when blame is not due and very often decisions that the Member States take for reasons which Member States are best in a position to determine, that is, a decision is made on the basis of their own national interest in pursuit of their own foreign policies, tend to be described very conveniently and collectively to be United Nations. For example, why didn't troops go to East Timor when the massacres there were occurring? It's all the fault of Secretary- General Kofi Annan. Well Kofi Annan does not have any troops. He cannot wave a wand and get it. And there was not a single government in the face of this earth that was about to send troops in to East Timor without an invitation from the Government of Indonesia. That, for example, is simply not reported when this allegation is made. So some of these things I think can be addressed by clarification, by explanation, by education, but sometimes, especially when you're dealing with short articles and short news broadcast, there isn't enough time to get all the nuances right.

CROSSETTE: The UN has been all over in a roller coaster since the end of the Cold War. Certainly it was fashionable to say right after – in the beginning of the '90s – that it was the biggest set of operations there ever had. That the UN could solve any problem, the Security Council had internal power to veto, was a thing of the past. And then there was a

slump. Now it looks like the United Nations is back in a very big way with very big operations and I just wonder if .... you come on a couple of things along this line. First of all, the complexity of these Operations – East Timor, Kosovo, and lurking out there, Congo, a different kind of Sierra Leone and perhaps others that we don't even know are coming down the road. These are in fact different. They're in fact more complicated than some of the big operations I think after the end of the Cold War. Is that not correct?

THAROOR: That's correct.

CROSSETTE: And doesn't the United Nations face the problem of having to do this without money? And with a certain lobby and some nations willing to pounce if things don't go perfectly so I think we ended up with the new millennium with tremendously large operations on the UN's plate.

THAROOR: I think it's quite likely. Let me see -- to begin with, I think in all fairness, that the pendulum had swung too far in the wrong direction at the end of the Cold War. It is true that there were failures not to mention tragedies in places like Bosnia, Somalia and of course the operation that wasn't – Rwanda -- and yet at the same time, the UN was pulling off some pretty remarkable successes in relation to work it was asked to do in places like Cambodia, in Mozambique where it ended a civil war every bit as brutal as Bosnia with some of the same phenomena -- the cleansing of villages, the mass rape of women, large numbers of casualties, in fact, larger than Bosnia. El Salvador is another example where we have to transform the society and politics of that country. Namibia of course, the first operation at the end of the '80s. All of these stories tended to be overlooked in the obsession with the so-called failures. And I must say I am tempted sometimes to say that instead of the old cliché that "no news is good news", when it comes to the media, we have to say that "good news is no news" at least when it involves the UN. The UN's good news stories, the UN's success stories simply don't get the kind of attention that other stories have tended to get. Now immediately of course there was a backlash and a number of governments on the Council, particularly one of the permanent members, found themselves reluctant to authorize new operations. Clearly the great problem there was there are a number of crisis around the world for which the only possible solution is a United Nations intervention. And NATO can act only in certain parts of Europe, but how many parts of the world are there in which there is a NATO available? So indeed the pendulum has swung now back I think towards a more sensible centre and UN peacekeeping is being given the responsibility to do the sorts of

things it has done well and well enough to win the Nobel Peace Prize back in 1988. The complexity of these operations have been compounded by the fact that we have major civilian challenges. Kosovo is an example where the military part is still being done by NATO-led coalition but the civilian task in Kosovo and what is going to happen in East Timor now is the task of really building a society from scratch -- for some reason worst than scratch -- at the society which has been both physically and morally destroyed by the events that precipitated the operation. And you're looking at the situation in which the UN is going to be building democratic institutions, trying not just to have elections, but register populations to begin with all over again, rehabilitate people who fled their homes, have rebuilt devastated villages and towns and at the same time to try and give some of the modicum of good governance that these societies require, are entitled to, and perhaps in some ways are not ready for.

CROSSETTE: And everything is set up so you even collect the garbage, provide the water services, and it's building a new nation -- it's a new kind of trusteeship, isn't it?

THAROOR: It is and the big question which you already implied, Barbara is, will the countries ready to provide resources for war also be ready to provide the resources for peace? Peace does not come cheap. By and large, it's true to say that the most expensive peace is going to be a good deal less expensive than the cheapest war. We've spent -- when I say we, I mean the International Community -- has spent, if you take Kosovo as an example, literally millions perhaps a billion dollars in waging war. Can we spend a small portion of that in helping build and rebuild that society? I think these are the challenges and East Timor I must say is one which we expect to be involved in for a good two or three years but one in which clearly the International Community is going to have to play its role financially as well.

WILLIAMS: The UN often looks like a sort of quantum particle -- it has two different states at the same time, and you mentioned them. One is a collective of Member States and which somehow all are equal but some are definitely more equal than others especially the United States since the Cold War; and the second one, as a sort of a corporate body in its own right and a body in the UN Charter, the Conventions on Human Rights and I remember the time of Bosnia, you yourself was sort of stuck in this quantum state between the two. I'm looking at the events you mentioned and -- Rwanda, for example, I think, to avoid paying $36 million dollars in peacekeeping charges, the United States stopped an operation that eventually cost it a billion dollars to pick up the pieces afterwards -- or in

Kosovo now where you have this strange, I must say the Secretary-General has been working a very, very narrow tightrope in saying the operation should have had the authorization of the Security Council but something should have been done. So on that case, he's sort of bridging the gap between these two states. But, for example, over Rwanda, do you think that if the United Nations, as a Secretariat, as a conscience that said something must be done about this, that in a country like the United States, that voice would have been sufficient to have influenced Congress to remove the ....

THAROOR: We did it and it wasn't and I think it's fair to say that the former Secretary-General Boutrous-Ghali really did declaim publicly the need for a response to what was happening in Rwanda and our general on the spot, who was there for a different operation not for the one that he found himself in the middle of, General Dallaire to this day says if he had 5000 soldiers he could have saved 500,000 lives and it was being said at the time the Council was reluctant to act. I believe the shadow of Somalia, the death of American servicemen in Mogadishu which had resulted essentially in the melting away of that Somalia operation in early 1994 just before the Rwanda genocide, that shadow is still cast over the deliberations of the Council and my feeling was that the Council was not in a hurry to risk lives or money in an operation at that point. Indeed, as you know, the Council took five or six weeks even to agree to pass a resolution on the subject and when it did, it authorized the 5,000 troops who would then have taken another month and a half to find because governments weren't able to provide the troops and those who could provide them, could not provide them with equipment and by the time we were able -- we were in a position to do something -- hundreds of thousands of lives have already been lost.

WILLIAMS: But if you take the other case – the more recent case of East Timor -- the UN in one sense was holding back in a sense of a collective of members saying we cannot do anything without the permission of the Indonesians but in its sort of corporate conscience body, there's a clear reservation saying the Indonesians should have been there and it has nothing to do with them anyway.

THAROOR: It seems both I think. It's like there's a question of principle and a question of realism and practice involved. The question of principle is a vital one. The Secretary-General, as you correctly pointed out Ian, has pointed to the dilemma that exists between the overriding concerns of state sovereignty that are very much in the minds of many Member States and which are enshrined in the UN Charter in Article 2 Paragraph 7,

and the equally overriding concerns of human rights and international principles equally enshrined in the charter and in its preamble and of course in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And this tension is not a new one, by the way. It's not just Kosovo or East Timor. You can look – even I as an Indian can say – way back in 1946 before India was even independent, the Indian Delegation raised the question of apartheid themselves – Africa – which one could argue nominally there was a domestic policy followed by sovereign member state within its own borders. But the UN did not hesitate to condemn it and stood up and spoke against apartheid throughout the life of that vile institution. So the fact is that UN has taken a position on policies within Member States and the Secretary-General has said, look we have to avoid this situation with the Council. It's either united in inaction, which is what happened on Rwanda, or is disunited and therefore the action is taken by somebody else, as happened in Kosovo. Now when you look at Timor, that's when the issue of the practical reality of the situation comes in. They may well have been after all a refusal by the General Assembly to accept Indonesia's annexation of East Timor so that in practice there some members of the UN had indeed recognized that the UN as a whole have not, and one could argue therefore sovereignty didn't apply, but the fact still remain – to intervene, we need a government willing to intervene. The UN has no standby force it could have just sent in in pursuance of the General Assembly resolution or the Security Council's concerns. It needed governments willing to act and the fact is, as I said earlier this broadcast, there is not a single government on the face of this planet that was prepared to offer a single soldier to go into East Timor until such time as the government of Indonesia was prepared to invite them in. That's the real world and I think in that practical reality, lay the way in which the UN handled that particular problem.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Shashi Tharoor, Director of Communications and Special Projects in the Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Mr. Tharoor, why is it that it take so long for the UN to act even when it has a mandate? I think one of the reasons NATO and the multinational force in East Timor, NATO in Kosovo went in, is that it takes forever for the UN to put a force together. Why does it take so long?

THAROOR: Well, because we don't have the resources to do it quicker. As I said, we don't have a standing army for instance. Any army in the world has people ready usually

we don't have a standing army for instance. Any army in the world has people ready usually to move at 24 hours notice. The UN does not have that capacity. There are some governments which are attempting to create something called the standing high readiness brigade which I believe will become operational early in the year 2000, who will be able to send troops at a much greater speed than in the past. There's only a handful of governments that have agreed to participate on this arrangement and even then, we suspect, they will not be quite as fast as say NATO might be or any country's army might be, if called upon to intervene. We have to go out to governments each time, for example, that a particular problem exists. The Security Council has to pass a resolution. We then have to submit a report proposing a concept of operations. The Council has to approve that. We then have to go to governments and say will you give us the troops we need. Some will say yes, some will say no. Some of those who say yes, which is "yes, we can give you the troops but we don't have armoured personnel carriers or we don't have the jeeps or we don't have the winter clothing," for example, if it's an operation in Europe. We then have to try and get there. We then have to make our own logistical arrangements. We contract the suppliers, we contract the shipping companies to get the troops out there, everything has to be done by us from scratch. And what is more, we don't even have a working capital fund with ready money to do any of these. While this has been planned, we are trying to go out to the Budgetary Committees of the UN asking Member States to authorize the money so we can pay the suppliers, and so on, and so forth. And there I mentioned that of course some of our dues are still unpaid. There's one major government – the United States – which is even as a matter of policy only agree in principle to pay 25 percent whereas by international agreement it says 31 percent. A shipping company, for example, is not going to give us a 6 percent discount because one Member State won't pay what it's supposed to. To give you a simple example, these are some of the enormous challenges we face. I'm not suggesting that we're perfect. I'm not suggesting that everything is done in a way that can't be improved. But given the realities, given the slim staffing resources we have, given the fact that we have to start from scratch every time, we have a real problem.

CROSSETTE: Since you are – let's change the subject a whole lot – but since you are the sort of first image maker of the Organization, tell us about how Kofi Annan after almost three years is establishing his personality within the Organization and the general public and something about some of the criticism he has been opened to, for example, spending too

lot of people a distant from here worried about their influence in globalization, and so on. His – what some people call – his penchant for celebrity life in New York – Kofi does Hollywood that kind of thing – but what's going on here and why?

THAROOR: Well, that's actually a number of questions in one, Barbara. As far as the overall image issue is concerned, I think that there is no question that we all consider the Secretary-General personally to be one of the biggest assets of the Organization. He comes across as the person he is – somebody who is warm, who is accessible, who is compassionate, who engages with people on issues directly, who is absolutely on his image, striking how often he has been exempt from criticisms applied to the Institution because even but him we like, and he is honest , he tells us the way it is. So in that sense, we believe we have a Secretary-General who we can all be proud of as United Nations staff. And who we believe puts a face on the Organization that's particularly vital in these days of television and let's face it, the personality-driven sense of awareness for world affairs. It's important that the Secretary-General not be an anonymous faceless bureaucrat but somebody who really stands for something, somebody who is recognized in the street and believe me, he is. It is always delightful travelling with the Secretary-General to see admiration and in some cases the adoration that he seems to inspire in ordinary men, women and children of the streets in various countries around the world. And to us that's been the source, I think, of both pride and satisfaction. Now on the specific criticisms that you raised, which of course, deserve to be addressed, if you look at his opening to business, his opening to the private sector, and so on, he always believed from the very beginning of his appointment, he has said that it always struck him that the Charter of the United Nations begins with the words 'we the peoples' and we spend all our time thinking that the UN as we, the governments. It is important, he feels, that the United Nations should be returned to the peoples of the world and at the same time, that we in the United Nations should reach out to ordinary people that they'll feel that they too have a state. That this is not really a body which is a club of governments doing its work. It is also that. I cannot deny for a minute that governments do run this place. This is an assemblage of governments, but it is also in the Secretary-General's view a body to which the private sector, ordinary citizens, Non-Governmental Organizations, the mass media, trade unions, academics and indeed business have every right to belong. So he has tried very much to move in that direction. And I tell you that on the business front, too, for which he has already been criticized by some particularly in the South, he has quite ....

has already been criticized by some particularly in the South, he has quite ....

LITTLEJOHNS: In the developing countries ...

THAROOR: In the developing countries, in the global south, he is, really acknowledging the reality which is of the days in which the challenge of the development can be met by government-to-government aid flows from the developed world for developing our own world. Today, private sector flows of capital to the developing world from the developed, outstrip official flows by a factor of 4 to 1 or 5 to 1 and the figures are keeping on going up. Official developments is declining. Private flows are increasing. What the Secretary-General wants to do is to put the UN's development agenda on to the minds of the business community.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is he getting a good response?

THAROOR: Yes, he is getting a surprisingly good response. He has been out to the World Economic Forum in Davos two years in a row.

WILLIAMS: Hardly we the peoples there.

THAROOR: No. We're answering this specific question here to the extent to which the captains of industry globally have been receptive to his message. In fact I must say that the head of the World Economic Forum rather pointedly remarked after one session that Kofi Annan had with business leaders he said, 'you know a year or two ago we witnessed the end of the East-West divide. Today we have had the end of the North-South divide and I think that is very important because as Kofi Annan pointed out very often in every country in the North, there is a bit of a south, and in every country of the south, there is a bit of the north. You can't avoid the fact that we have to work together in finding solutions and business will be an engine for development if they can be given the enabling environment on which to work.

CROSSETTE: Is it going to take another five years to do it?

WILLIAMS: You mentioned about how nice the Secretary-General is enough to continue his impression that comes over. I found that the British in New York, you find steel wool or a dead mouse in your soup in a restaurant and you say, 'excuse me there's a dead mouse' and they say, 'shut up'. If you jump up and down on the table and shout, 'where's my lawyer, where's my lawyer, I'll sue', they'll say, 'yes, yes, please have more soup, it's free, the bill is on us'. Don't you think there's a danger in a society, like the United States, of being far too nice so the people in Congress don't realize just how serious the United Nations

and the rest of the Member States are?

THAROOR: Having worked closely with Kofi Annan for many years, I must say that there is a great deal of steel underneath that velvet glove of his, too. And we have seen a man of both determination and will and a very decisive manager at the same time. So that the suggestion that niceness is all, I think, should ....

WILLIAMS: I am not suggesting that. I'm suggesting that being nice to people all of the time does not pay.

THAROOR: As far as paying, you mentioned Congress. The problem really in Congress is that ultimately it is an issue between the United States Government and its own legislature. It is not really for the Secretary-General of the United Nations to go to the legislature of each Member States and make the kiss for them to fulfill their solemn treaty obligations. Having said that, he decided that it would help, and if it could help, he would try and do it. He has met with a number of legislators. If there is a positive outcome to this long-running and long-drawn out side on Capitol Hill, he will, I believe, get a small part of the credit. But ultimately, it is something that the administration of the US government will have to deliver.

LITTLEJOHNS: People often jump on the so-called bloated bureaucracy in the UN and the Secretary-General is requested to reform the Organization as his predecessors were also asked to do. How successful has the reform process been?

THAROOR: Well, I think it has been successful but I should stress that even though I am becoming a bit of a bureaucrat myself, I don't really believe in all seriousness that the UN is an overstaffed bloated bureaucracy. When you think about the fact that in every single UN agency, specialized agency, UN programmes, Secretariat put together in the world – everything from world health, to labour, to civil aviation to peacekeeping everything put together employs fewer people than Disney World. We are not a Mickey Mouse operation. Let's admit that in terms of numbers, the criticism is considerably exaggerated. We are talking abo it an Organization which has a budget smaller than that of a New York City Fire Department, we are talking about an Organization which employs in its Secretariat fewer people that ran one medium size city in a prairie province of Canada. We're not talking about a very large Organization. Having said that, reform is something that the Secretary-General undertook to take for our own sake, I mean, we can do things more efficiently. We may not be as efficient as let's say a private sector corporation in America for the simple

reason that they're also a body that has to try and give representation and voice to a 188 Member States and there's always going to be an element that's built-in from that. But having said that, we still have, it seems to me, conduct an efficient reform, streamline the organization, cut posts, cut budgets and brought people together in a collaborative enterprise that is showing results both at Headquarters and on the field. And I believe, what's more, that those governments that are clamouring for reform have themselves, acknowledged this and that is ultimately the vindication for the reform methods of Kofi Annan.

CROSSETTE: It's often a question, isn't it, around this place of management styles in that some .... because often when people outside seem to think they're always working corruption towards whatever here in it and there aren't – well at least they are not what people think they are, where one does find problems often is in inefficient management and this is again a clash of cultures, it's a clash of management cultures, I don't know what kind of steps he has been taking I think there have been seminars or perhaps ...

THAROOR: That's right. What we're trying to do, of course, is to improve management culture in the Organization. We've always started to have a very, very small budget for training including management training. We're trying to use that and increase the budget in order to improve training skills, get people much more exposed to issues of management as it is done today, not only in private sector organizations but in other public sector organizations. But inefficiencies and corruption are two different things. As far as corruption or wrongdoing is concerned, I would say we're pretty proud of our record in ferreting it out ourselves. I don't think there's a corruption story about the United Nations that has come out that has not been identified by the UN's own mechanism – our internal audits, the Office of Internal Oversight Services – and indeed we've gone so far as to prosecute the wrongdoers. There isn't an easy ride anymore. We've put somebody in jail for stealing $800,000 in Bosnia and that's going to be the spirit that will animate this place.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Tharoor that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Shashi Tharoor, Director of Communications and Special Projects in the Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. He was interviewed by Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times* and Ian Williams of *The Nation*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

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